

CAPT. THOS. P. LEATHERS

BEFORE THE

U. S. Committee on Commerce,

WASHINGTON, D. C., MARCH 31, 1882.

1940

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NEW ORLEANS:

L. Graham & Son, Printers and Stationers, 127 Gravier Street.

1882.

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The Chairman of the Committee advised Capt. Thomas P. Leathers that he would be allowed fifteen minutes to address the Committee on the subject of the overflow of the Mississippi River. Capt. Leathers said: If I am to have only fifteen minutes, I prefer that no questions be asked me, and I shall only go back to 1873. I do not propose to give you a history of my career through forty-five years in steamboating, and all in fifteen minutes. I will go back to 1873, when this disastrous work began. In 1873 we steamboatmen met in convention and sent you a memorial signed by every man who owned a plank on the Mississippi and its tributaries, and asked you for a deep outlet by the way of Fort St. Phillip Canal. We asked you to build a canal, and we asked you to keep all the bridges above the tops of the boats, 120 feet above high water mark. We asked you to run the bridges square across the river, and put the piers on each side of the channel, and have a draw for boats to go through where bridges could not be built sufficiently high. If your information has not been correct in constructing bridges for navigable streams to permit the passage of steamboats, why, you have not got it from steamboatmen.

The plan we defined was not taken to deepen the channel of the river, but it was proposed to open one of the passes. That is, the South Pass. Well, so far as that was concerned, we steamboatmen never indorsed it. I never entertained the opinion that it would succeed permanently, but when we find that the Government has spent four or five millions of money in mattresses, dams and taxation to overflow the country,

which it has done, by raising the river one foot at the head of the passes, where it only rises to four feet, it necessarily builds it up four feet at New Orleans. Four feet at New Orleans would be 12 at Vicksburg, because the fall is as 3 to 1 at Vicksburg above that at New Orleans. The fall is 4 to 1 at New Orleans above the head of the passes.

Now as for this flood, it has come in February, and is like a tidal wave. It burst the river's banks in Tunica and Coahoma Counties, or at Helena, and the current does not move more than 35 miles a day. It sweeps everything before it like a tidal wave, and overwhelms plantations that have never before been touched in the recollection of the oldest inhabitants. I have known them for 46 years, and they have never been touched by the water before.

I saw last Monday, a week ago, when I landed at Hard Times, that there was not a levee in sight. A little steamboat had been employed to take a lot of stock out of Lake St. Joseph, and she ran blind against the levee. I called to the pilot to come up where I was and go through the break in the levee. The next place I landed was at Point Pleasant. There they asked me to go to the Butrick place, three miles up the old river, and get sixty or seventy horses and mules. I found about 200 negroes, trying to dry themselves, and drying jerked beef from their drowned cattle. I gave them flour and meal, a couple of sacks of salt and a little bacon. But the levee, six inches above water by six feet wide and 300 yards long was all they saw of land for twenty miles, and not a boat to look after them. There must be something radically wrong down at the mouth of the river. The water breaks through its banks about the first of February at Helena, Ark., and it was the middle of March before it passed the mouth of Red River, overflowing everything as it goes. There is not a solitary piece of ground in sight except a few levees built a little higher than the others, all that is left from Fort Hudson to Vicksburg, a distance of about 300 miles.

If you stop up the mouth of the river, as at Southwest Pass and Pass à l'Ouvre, as has been done, where it has never been under 20 to 21½ feet before, it is now reduced to 10 feet on the

sea bar. The Pass à l'Ostre is now reduced to five feet, and all the little intervening passes having outlets are stopped, and if you do not run another drop of water into the valley, the South Pass would not receive and discharge the water through the passes in five months. It is impossible to drive a river like that through a funnel 26 feet deep by 500 feet wide. It could not go out there, and now, gentlemen, take the telegrams and the papers, and give a fair decision.

Where is this water from? It is almost entirely alone from the Ohio River and its tributaries, and from the Red River a little. Red River has not been unusually high, and the Ohio has. But we have always had a bigger river below the mouth of the Ohio than the Ohio has ever dared to be, and we have never been overflowed, to my knowledge and within my experience, for the last forty-six years in that lower valley, without the help of the Missouri and Upper Mississippi. I say that we have not the capacity at the mouth of the river to discharge all this volume of water. Science has not told you how to do it. I can not, unless you have outlets and let it out: and I will lay my property down for a wager—every dollar that I have got in the world—if you will open the river at Lake Borgne and rebuild those levees that are destroyed and worn down now, and make an opening for a mile wide, sufficient to carry off 8 or 10 feet of the flood water, I will lay my life down that you will never hear the complaint of a planter again nor a call for rations. It is something that I can not realize; it is painful for me to discuss this subject. It is for you, gentlemen, and you alone, to tell the people how this great problem should be solved. I venture my life that what I propose will effect the desired result. I think the experiment should at least have a trial. I see that we have crevasses now that run from the Atchafalaya, or from the head of Pointe Coupee into Berwick Bay, and destroys a country that is as rich as any land on earth. On the other or east side, the overflow below Baton Rouge, it has to go into Lake Pontchartrain, in the rear of New Orleans, which city stands about sixteen feet above the tide. The water with sixteen feet fall running five miles into the Gulf, I should think would lower it

fully ten feet. I have no lands, no plantations to drown. I have no favor to ask personal to myself, but I do speak for my people. They have sent petition after petition to you here to make this outlet—call it a scheme, if you please—call it anything, and the scheme was not brought into notice by Cowdon, but he has developed it into a great system. I read Harris on it fifty years ago, and Stewart: in favor of the Lake Borgne outlet. It has never been tried. But now, since you have permitted it, and paid big money to stop up the mouth of the river, I ask you to try it. I do not come here to attack the jetties, but I know something of the passes. I have been there and certainly am satisfied that I am correct. I do not think my head would teach me to say to you gentlemen what I do not conscientiously think, and I think this the whole cause of the overflow. From my observation in 1874,—when I saw the water concentrated in Tensas and Madison and Concordia Parishes, I saw that the levees raised the water at the mouth of the Red River. I then went to Bayou Sara and telegraphed the Cotton Exchange in New Orleans that the levees on Point Coupee would not stand twelve hours. When I got to Baton Rouge, three hours run, or thirty-five miles, the water had fallen a foot there; and before the week was out it had fallen four and a half feet at New Orleans, that fall extended up to Vicksburg, 450 miles above New Orleans. There was four and a half feet below Red River and pulled it down eighteen inches at Natchez, and very preceptibly at Vicksburg.

I would not give my experience on the river, when it comes down to the principle of improving navigation, for all their science. You may vote for the River Commission to have its millions of money, but I would force that Commission to go into the bottom of the river, and to pull up all the wrecks, all snags, all logs, and let nature take its course. I would not think that one-half of the river was bigger than the whole.

I would clean out the bottom of the rivers, and encourage the current to deepen the river.

At St. Louis to-day, with 16 or 17 feet of water in the Mississippi, by the gauge, no ten-foot boat can go up or down the river. It never falls to low-water mark. The Ohio River was

jettied when I was a boy, by captain Shreve. He built simply a dam called a beaver dam. He was not as well equipped as the beaver, that has a trowel on his tail with which he plas-ters. The floods of 1836 came and broke down that dam and raised the bottom two feet.

Take the records of the papers for low water and high water within the last fifty years, and you will find that the Ohio goes to the high water mark, but never to low water mark. Although the mails were carried last summer in skiffs—no boats running—still the river showed two feet on the guage above low water mark.

There must be something wrong about this. We should go right down and remove all the obstructions. We should encourage the river to go in its banks and be quiet there.

Gentlemen, we will want the soil reclaimed, and all these rich lands must be cultivated. You must, therefore, give the people on the Lower Mississippi confidence. They must not abandon their lands. You cannot do it alone by levee building, nor by jetties. I went home last January and advised my friends to abandon the valley, and a good many did so. Mr. Harris, David Miller, and another planter in Tensas Parish, moved their stock three weeks before the water over-ran the country. They came to me for advice, and I gave it to them: "Go move your stock out of the valley, the river is going it blind." Gentlemen, that is the expression I have got to make, for it seeks its way through the sugar plantations, through the cotton fields and everywhere else; and I challenge contradiction of what I say about stopping up the mouth of the river.

I do not come here to attack the jetties at all, but I see no reason that if the river is 208 feet deep by 3,000 feet wide at New Orleans, as it is, and only 26 feet deep by 500 feet wide through the South Pass, as it is, I see no reason why Lake Borgne outlet should not pull the water down fully ten feet, so that the people there would be enabled to produce their sugar and cotton. I can see no injury that it would do the jetties. The Lake Borgne outlet will save this generation and should it fill up in the course of 50 or 100 years, it will teach

the next generation how to find some other outlet to prevent overflow.

I do not agree that these lower outlets causes the river to shoal below them, for there has been a big outlet at Plaquemine and at Morganza and at Bonnet Carré. I never heard of any shoaling before below them. When I came on the river I was a strong levee man. I have been and am before you now; but if you persist in keeping the river filled up at its mouth, then I say that the levees are of no account.

And if you would build a levee forty feet high, they could not hold the water unless the outlets are opened. I do not think planters have had any voice here in the world---certainly none that I have ever heard of.

I speak for them. I am no engineer. I profess to be a pretty good navigator, and pretty good constructor and an A No. 1 steamboatman.

I know I have done as well as anybody else in my trade, and this is my experience, and I say that without you do something to get rid of the water, it is no use to build levees, but for God's sake make Lake Borgne outlet, rebuild the levees and get rid of some of the water, and let the people go back and whistle once more at the plow handle, those that can get back.

They have not anything to go back with---no cow in sight, not a hog, or sheep, or goat, or poultry---only a few poor mules, and no rations.

*You have reduced them to that, and have stood flat-footed and defeated everything else but science, which has ruined the country. You have not looked at practical results, but blindly followed the doings of science. I do not say that you are blind to it, but you should look at this great question from a practical standpoint.*

I have asked a committee to go there, I invited gentlemen from St. Louis, Louisville, Memphis and the press of New Orleans, and the people on the coast to go down and look at what was going on there. The trip cost me about \$500, and I was only complimented for giving a magnificent entertainment on my steamer by the New Orleans press.



Since I went to New Orleans in 1836, when they claimed that the river rose 14 feet, we landed near the Custom-house. There are now three blocks of buildings outside, and they say it now rises 16 feet. By the elongation of the river into the Gulf, the elevation became higher, and the levees have to be built higher. It has built itself up by elongation a foot and a half, and by Mr. Eads blocking up Southwest Pass, and Pass à l'Outre it backs it up four feet more at New Orleans, and so, gentlemen, we must hedge against that kind of work, and we cannot levee against it. I swear you cannot. Call it what you please, let us take some of it out. Make the outlet, and put the levees back where they were, and I do not think you will have any further trouble. I do not think that people will ever telegraph you again for rations. That is blistering to me. I know the wants of the people there. I know they are destitute, and furthermore, I know they have not got the credit to buy anything. I know that a million bales of cotton have been destroyed in that valley by the present overflow. I know I have carried over one hundred thousand myself, with my single boat this year. I think, gentlemen, I have given you roughly, my views on this subject. Mr. Chairman, I more than thank you for the indulgence you have shown me. I think I have spoken the sentiments of nineteen out of every twenty persons of the valley of the Mississippi. I have not come here as a paid individual, I have not come here to be dead-headed by any enterprise in the world.

Take me for just what I am, but do not think that I do not believe what I say. I have been as well educated to the duties of steamboating and observations of the movement of the Mississippi river as anybody.

Figures on papers don't teach me anything about the river. I have never found a book that I learned from it anything about Mississippi river navigation.

If I were in mid-ocean, I would want a navigator to give me the bearings ; but if he would come on the Mississippi river I would tell him all about it. I never had a complaint in forty-five years ; never hurt a passenger, and never hurt anybody in my life ; and I say that I am proud of my career.



I am sorry for the people that I am representing, for it appears that they have no one to represent them in Congress.

I cannot help them; it's not in my power; if I could I would.

The matter rests with this Congress whether they have relief or be compelled to abandon all they have left in that valley.

Mr. White—Do I understand you that at this time the Missouri and the Upper Mississippi are not very flush?

Capt. Leathers—The Missouri is frozen over. It has not now more than from 3 to 5 feet water.

Mr. White—In your opinion what would be the effect when the Upper Missouri breaks up and the snows begin to melt and the flood comes from that direction?

Capt. Leathers—Well, if the flood comes in proportion to the Ohio, we have not seen anything yet. The Missouri is the biggest tributary of the Mississippi. She has 2,000 miles of navigation above St. Louis, to say nothing of the Upper Mississippi (or Arkansas) that has but little in it now. But nobody has ever seen an overflow in the lower valley that was not assisted partially and very largely from the Missouri.

Mr. White—Until this stopping of the river mouth?

Captain Leathers—Yes, sir.

Mr. Washburn—As a matter of fact the Upper Mississippi has been unusually high this year, for the time of year?

Captain Leathers—Well, there is nothing from it below Cairo. But, as you say, it was high in November, before the Ohio came out.

Mr. Washburn—At this season of the year it has never been so high?

Capt. Leathers—It is the Ohio that is doing this overflow now. The Upper Mississippi to-day ain't more than navigable water. It is about eighteen feet, and there is not more than ten feet of water out from St. Louis.